

Meshech Chochmah Parshas Vayishlach

Divine Inventory

וַיְהִי לִי שׂוֹר וַחֲמֹר

I have acquired oxen and donkeys.” (32:6)

Our parsha begins with Yaakov’s conciliatory message to Esav upon his return home after twenty years in Lavan’s house. In the course of that message, Yaakov lists the assets he acquired while away.¹ Looking at our pasuk, the Meshech Chochmah raises an interesting question:

- We know from the gift that Yaakov subsequently sends Esav that he had many camels as well, also a noteworthy asset. Why would he omit them from his opening list, mentioning only oxen and donkeys?

The Etz Hada’as: Venomous Fruit

To understand the background to all of this, the Meshech Chochmah refers us to a statement of the Gemara elsewhere,² that at the time of the sin with the *Etz Hada’as*, the snake injected a venom into Chava, and hence into mankind. This venom remained within the system of humankind; however, in Yaakov’s days it departed from him and his family. What is the nature of this venom, and how did it come to depart from Yaakov?

The Meshech Chochmah explains as follows. The pasuk in Koheles³ describes the original state in which Man was created as “*yashar* – upright.” This refers to the fact that his essential inclination was toward good. As we know, Evil did exist even at that early stage, however, it existed as something extrinsic to Man. To be sure, it was possible for Evil to tempt him from the outside (as it did), and moreover, it was possible for him to succumb to that temptation (as he did). Nevertheless, that was an external force, for all of man’s internal tendencies were toward good.

¹ The words for oxen and donkeys are written in the singular, but are taken as a generic reference to the species as a whole.

² *Shabbos* 146a.

³ 7:29: “אשר עשה האלקים את האדם ישר”.

However, this situation itself changed with the sin of the *Etz Hada'as*. From this point onwards, the drive towards evil entered man and became part of his internal makeup, so that it was no longer true to say that his inner inclination would always tend toward good. This was the “venom” with which the snake injected Chava – the inner drive towards evil which became part of the mankind’s fundamental makeup.⁴

A Three-Stage Refining Process

The situation as described above continued until one man came and began to reverse it – Avraham *Avinu*. Through his monumental spiritual and moral achievements, he was able to initiate the process of refining and separating once more the pure from the impure. This refinement found expression in the radically divergent makeup of his two sons, for Yishmael “drew out” the impurities, leaving Yitzchak to receive and embody that which was pure within Avraham. This process continued in the next generation as well, with Esav drawing out any remaining impurities from Yitzchak, leaving Yaakov as the pure finished product, finally rid of the snake’s venom.

The implications of Yaakov achieving this state – which he then bequeathed to his descendants – ultimately defines the way we view the nature of the Jewish people, as well as each individual Jew. For now we once again look upon the essential nature of the Jew as “*yashar*,” upright, the way Hashem originally created man. He may yet, sin, but that drive is looked upon as “outside interference” – even though it resides inside of him! – not an expression of his true will. As Rav Alexandri expressed this idea in his private prayer following the *Shemoneh Esrei*, “Our (essential) will is to do Your will. What gets in the way? Yeast in the dough (the evil inclination) and negative influences from the governing nations.”⁵

Indeed, this idea finds expression in the halachic realm as well. There are certain *mitzvos* which require the consent of the person involved. In cases where it is judged that the person should do that mitzvah, yet he does not consent, the halachah states “we force him until he says ‘I consent’”. How does this represent genuine consent? Surely his words are nothing more than a response to our

⁴ See Ramban to *Bereishis* 2:9 and *Nefesh HaChaim shaar* 1 Chap. 6.

⁵ *Berachos* 17a.

coercion! The Rambam⁶ explains that, in reality, every Jew wishes to do the right thing. If he says he does not want to it is because an alien element within him, the *yetzer hara*, is preventing him from doing so. Therefore, when we apply coercion, we are in actuality subjugating his *yetzer hara*, so that when he then says “I consent” he is voicing his innermost will which can finally express itself. The basis upon which all of the above rests is the axiomatic assertion that the essential nature of the Jew is to do good. This is what was achieved by the refining process of the Avos, culminating in the final product of Yaakov Avinu.

From Camels to Oxen and Donkeys

Most interestingly, in contrast to Yaakov’s non-mention of camels while talking to Esav, they feature prominently in the Torah’s description of events involving his mother, Rivkah: The pasuk inform us how Eliezer arrives in Charan with a caravan of ten camels, how Rivka waters the camels, how Eliezer feeds the camels in Besuel’s house, how Rivka follows Eliezer back on a camel and how she alights from the camel upon seeing Yitzchak. It appears that camels represent something of a motif in the whole episode. How is this so?

Commenting on the pasuk which states that Rivkah rode on a camel as she accompanied Eliezer to Canaan, the Midrash⁷ explains that Rivkah’s own state paralleled that of a camel. For an animal to be considered kosher, it needs two characteristics, to have split hooves and to chew the cud. Most animals have either both or neither characteristics, but the camel has one of each, in that it chews the cud but does not have split hooves. Halachically, as we know, such an animal is completely non-kosher. However, thematically, the Midrash states that Rivkah’s own state was similar to that of a camel in that, of her two children, Yaakov and Esav, one was pure and one was impure. With the process of refinement not yet complete, good and evil had not yet been fully separated from each other.

This brings us back to Yaakov’s opening message to Esav upon his return home. Part of that message is understood by Chazal as a description of his spiritual state. For example, when he says “עַם לָבָן גֵּרְתִּי – *I sojourned with Lavan*,” this is understood as a reference to the fact that he kept the six hundred and thirteen mitzvos while with Lavan (גרתִי = תרי"ג). In a similar vein, the Meshech Chochmah

⁶ *Hilchos Geirushin* 2:20.

⁷ *Bereishis Rabbah* 60:14.

explains that this is the deeper meaning of what Yaakov means by telling Esav that he had acquired “an ox and a donkey.” He is not describing his livestock inventory, but rather, his spiritual state. An ox possesses both characteristics required for an animal to be kosher, it is “completely” kosher. In contrast, a donkey possesses neither, and hence it is “completely” not kosher. Thus Yaakov’s words represent the fact that he had achieved the state where the pure and the impure had once again become completely distinct. Evil still existed, however, it was not integrated together with the good, rather, it was a separate, extrinsic entity. This is why Yaakov mentioned oxen and donkeys – but not camels. The process of refinement had been completed!